



# THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND THE CHURCH

BY REV MARK BROWN

There is a revolution sweeping across the globe, driven by the massive growth of the internet and internet related technologies. Known as the Digital Revolution<sup>1</sup> it is on a par with other great global shifts such as the Agrarian Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. And it is completely changing the landscape of how we communicate, how we

influence, how we relate. This isn't simply about coming to grips with a new technology to assist us in our work; it requires of us a fundamental shift in our processes, structures and approaches. If we don't respond then, as Eric Hoffer states, we will find ourselves, *'beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.'*

The key shift is the ascendancy of the individual over the collective. The rallying cry of the revolution is:

***Just for me, wherever I am, however I want it, whenever I want it.***

And this revolution has come about through the extraordinary growth of the internet. In just a short period of time the internet has grown to around 23.01 billion pages<sup>2</sup> with some 1.3 billion people using it<sup>3</sup>. It is predicted that this year more information will be created on the Web than in all previous years combined.<sup>4</sup> The computer is no longer a specialist tool but is now very much a part of our every day environment. As Jonathan Carson, International President for the research company Nielsen Online, notes, *'The Internet is no longer a niche technology - it is mass media and an utterly integral part of modern life. Almost no aspect of life remains untouched by online media.'*<sup>5</sup> Internet based applications now play a part in major advances in science, business, environmental care, transport logistics, government and education to name a few. As Susanne Huttner, OECD Director for Science, Technology and Industry states,

*Nowadays, without the Internet, planes would not fly, financial markets would not operate, supermarkets would not restock, taxes would not get paid and the power grid would not balance the supply and demand for electricity.'*<sup>6</sup>

Change is a natural part of life, as we read in Ecclesiastes 3:1, *'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.'* And as verse 6 reads, *'...a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away...'* Well the time has come for the church to 'seek' and to 'cast away'. We as a church cannot ignore this digital revolution. To do so is to potentially lose touch with the very community we seek to serve and influence.

In this paper I outline the characteristics of this digital revolution and how it is affecting human behavior, and through this I hope to inform the discussion of what changes we within the church and church agencies may need to make so as to engage this emerging digital generation.

## LOCAL TO GLOBAL

The digital revolution is fundamentally re-drawing the boundaries of how we relate. Visitors to my blog<sup>7</sup> come from 103 countries, including such locations as Panama, Saudi Arabia, Rwanda, Faroe Islands, Iran, Russia and China. This sort

of geographic diversity is not an uncommon experience with the internet providing connections and access to people and resources from around the world. This enables those in ministry to influence people across the globe. Whether sharing the love of Jesus, or managing an organization, the internet enables us to readily relate to people thousands of miles away. I recently participated in a meeting held in Guildford, UK, from the comfort of my home in New Zealand. And by participating online I saved considerable funds, plus the time and inconvenience of international travel, not to mention reducing my environmental impact.<sup>8</sup>

In participating in a global community I can connect with other like minded people as part of a network. So though I struggle to find people in my local community who share my interest in internet research, I am able to be part of an email discussion list that includes similar like minded people from across the world.<sup>9</sup>

## PULLING DOWN THE FENCES

With the growth of the internet has come a plethora of useful creative programs and applications, most of which are created outside the traditional corporate system. They are quite often driven by altruistic motives rather than money making and are therefore usually offered for free. One classic example is Mozilla,<sup>10</sup> a global community of thousands of volunteer programmers who *'sincerely believe in the power of technology to enrich people's lives.'*<sup>11</sup> They state,

*The common thread that runs throughout Mozilla is our belief that, as the most significant social and technological development of our time, the Internet is a public resource that must remain open and accessible to all. With this in mind, our efforts are ultimately driven by our mission of encouraging choice, innovation and opportunity online. (ibid.)*

This is known as "open source" for the way in which it is open to all to be involved, whether developing it or using it. The most famous Mozilla project is their web browser Firefox, which broke records when the third version was launched in July of 2008 with more than 8 million downloads in just 24 hours.

The traditional model of fencing off a product or service and charging admission is being challenged. Progressive institutions are working out how best to achieve their mission in this open source environment. This requires completely new business and operational models.

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George Fox University in the USA is offering a Doctor of Ministry degree<sup>12</sup> which sees some fences pulled down. As Dr. Jason Clark, one of the key mentors on the program writes,

*Other than student grades, we are going to try through social media to have the course materials, discussions, etc freely available to anyone who wants to participate with us. My hope is that lots of people who would benefit from some or all of the program, but can't be registered students, will join us.*

The program will make use of Twitter for people to stay in touch via their mobile phones,<sup>13</sup> podcasts to share recorded video and audio, blogs (the students share their papers and reflections on their blogs where others can interact directly), and they will stay in touch through the social networking site Facebook.

## ANY TIME, ANYWHERE

Ivan G. Seidenberg, Chairman and CEO of Verizon Communications notes, *'..everything will be all media, all the time.'*<sup>14</sup> Seidenberg is confirming the reality that the internet never 'turns off' and with the growing number of regions with internet access, we can now be connected any time and just about anywhere.

A major piece of research by the Associated Press into the future of media highlights this well when it states that news consumers have a

*..ubiquity of news to select from at almost any time, from anywhere, on a variety of technologies and platforms—television, internet, mobile devices, radio and more.*<sup>15</sup>

The expectation now is that the modern reporter needs to *'report what is happening, not what has happened.'*(*ibid.*) I saw an example of this recently while watching the TV news, noticing that the journalist reported live while the news was actually happening behind him.

An excellent example of this any time anywhere characteristic is the electronic book reader, Kindle, by the giant online bookseller, Amazon.com. It holds up to 300 titles including books, magazines and newspapers. But what is spectacular is that it is also connected to the internet, so purchasing a new book and having it delivered ready to read can all happen in as little as 5 minutes.

This capacity to be in touch any time, anywhere also chal-

lenges the usual procedures for many Christian organizations. One example is the infrequency of governance meetings (including once a year in the case of large regional organizations), at which issues are discussed and action points decided upon, with very little happening in the interim. It is now possible and preferable to maintain contact throughout the year, so participants can be discussing the issues as they arise and are able to make decisions more quickly, in line with the rapid change we are presently experiencing. I am part of a leadership team that uses an email discussion list system,<sup>16</sup> and as the issues arise we are able to discuss them and reach a decision in a matter of days. We have also made good use of Google Docs,<sup>17</sup> which allows us to work collaboratively on a document online.

## HYPERCONNECTED, BUT AM I LISTENING?

There are now a vast numbers of ways we can stay connected and in touch. Multiple email accounts, social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, instant messaging, text messaging, RSS feeds,<sup>18</sup> and blogs to name a few. This is creating a generation of hyperconnected individuals who on average use at least seven devices and nine connectivity applications.<sup>19</sup>

And as we can be connected any time and just about anywhere the boundary between work and personal life is becoming blurred with people accessing personal applications such as Facebook in work time and work being completed in personal time. This creates a raft of challenges around leading a balanced life and attending to professional expectations.

Hyperconnectivity is also leading to a growth in multi-tasking so as to stay on top of the large amount of data flowing through the various communications channels. But what is happening, according to Linda Stone, is that we are experiencing 'Continuous Partial Attention', which Stone describes as being motivated by a desire not to miss anything. Stone notes,

*..we feel most alive when we're connected, plugged in and in the know. We constantly scan for opportunities—activities or people—in any given moment. With every opportunity we ask, "What can I gain here?"*<sup>20</sup>

This scanning behavior is particularly interesting as whatever activity or forum we find ourselves in, whether a church service or reading the Bible, we become accustomed to scan-

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ning, to being only partially engaged and constantly seeking other stimuli and information. I remember the first meeting I attended where everyone had their laptop open and, as well as participating in the meeting, they were checking emails, catching up on news and so on. The meeting chair took umbrage and requested that everyone turn their laptops off; such protests have faded and this practice is now considered quite standard.

## WHO IS REALLY IN CHARGE HERE?

I recently had cause to set up a trust and whereas in the past I would have met with a lawyer who would have expertly advised me (whilst charging by the hour), in this instance I typed in 'starting a trust' in the Google search bar and within minutes I had the information I required. Aside from the significant question of whether the available on-line advice is reliable, having instant access to information is shifting the balance of power from the supply side to the demand side.<sup>21</sup> A piece in the influential Marketing Week magazine notes,

*Never before has the consumer been more informed, more empowered, more in control. As a result, we have seen the irresistible rise of one metric above all others - word of mouth. Whether we track it as advocacy, recommendation, net promoter score, this is now the gold standard for marketing. (ibid.)*

Information is no longer able to be completely controlled by an institution, whether a church or a corporation. Van Wishard describes this as the fragmentation of collective systems of belief. With information so freely available, Van Wishard argues that people are empowered to 'make up their own minds on an issue.'<sup>22</sup>

The role and power of the institution is diluted when people have direct access to information and also feel empowered to

decide what is right amongst the various offerings. Frederick Gedicks and Roger Hendrix in their paper, 'Religious Experience in the Age of Digital Reproduction'<sup>23</sup> note,

*As in so many other areas, the digital revolution has effected a cutting out (of) the "middleman" for religious experience.*

They argue that the church (middleman) is losing its ability to influence people who are becoming part of network collectives, and are defining their spiritual experience independently of the church. Scattered collaborative networks rather than centralized and hierarchical sets are the organizational system of the near future. The classic organizational pyramid is being turned upside down. As Seung-Won Yoon and Peter Kuchinke state,

*One important outcome of communication technologies is individuals' or competitors' increased access to information that can hamper organizational controls. This drives a company to explore the networked form of organizations rather than intensifying a deeper-level hierarchical system within geographical boundaries. One such example is the prevalence of global companies.<sup>24</sup>*

In early 2007 I founded an Anglican church in the virtual world of Second Life. The community, which now has over 520 members, is drawn from 20 nations. The nine person leadership team includes people from the UK, US, New Zealand and Australia and has never actually met in person as a group. Our monthly leadership meetings are conducted from within Second Life using voice. As a church we offer five services each week, a Bible Study, and a discussion group.<sup>25</sup> The Second Life church is typical of the emerging collaborative networks brought about by the growth of the internet: organic in its growth, disparate and multi-cultural in its membership, and capable of rapid change.



The final characteristic of rapid change is a particular challenge for the church and church agencies. As Gedicks et al. state,

*In a digital age, it is difficult for any hierarchical structures whether religious, governmental, or corporate, to react with sufficient speed to stay ahead of member preferences and demands.*<sup>26</sup>

We need to be light on our feet, ready to respond rapidly. We also need to take seriously the rapid changes happening around us and develop a continuous training approach for ourselves and our staff and volunteers. We also need to be prepared to make significant changes to our offerings. The questions need to be asked, 'Is this the most effective way of delivering our mission?' And in particular, 'Will our offerings connect with people?' As Marvin Cetron and Owen Davies outline,

*The design and marketing cycle — idea, invention, innovation, imitation — is shrinking steadily. Thus, products must capture their market quickly, before the competition can copy them. As late as the 1940s, the product cycle stretched to 30 or 40 years. Today, it seldom lasts 30 or 40 weeks.*<sup>27</sup>

In the face of this rapid change we need to be constantly questioning whether we and our programs are suited to the environment and then, in God's strength, stepping out courageously to undertake the necessary changes.

## MONITOR MEDIATED FRIENDSHIPS

To some it will seem strange that I have never met face to face with a vast majority of the more than 500 members of my church plant, but this is the reality of the digital revolution; people form community via the internet and may never meet in person. There are those predicting that in the not too distant future we will have more virtual contacts whom we have never physically met, than those we have met.<sup>28</sup>

Noted social commentator Hugh Mackay states, 'the idea that human presence is necessary for people to communicate with each other has gone.'<sup>29</sup> An example is the hugely successful social networking site Facebook. It recently passed 100 million members and spans the globe. It provides for free the infrastructure to stay in touch with people around the world by sharing photos and video, posting notes, sharing prayer needs, advertising events, or even raising funds or awareness for a cause.

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## A VIDEO STAR IN EVERY HOME

The digital revolution involves a shift from a few institutions providing content to millions of users providing content. Everyone is a potential movie maker (YouTube); a potential author (blogging, self-publishing), a potential photographer (Flickr), and editor and contributor of knowledge (Wikipedia). A couple of young friends recently posted a short video on YouTube in which, in a very entertaining way, they sum up the Bible in under a minute; within two months more than 850,000 people had watched it.<sup>30</sup> Online media offers huge potential to communicate to large numbers of people on very small budgets.

People are becoming empowered to exercise their creative ability and within our organizations we need to foster that, to provide ample opportunity for our volunteers and staff to participate in content creation.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

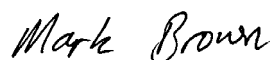
As the digital revolution sweeps across the globe we in the church have two choices: to work with the dramatic changes or to stay put and find ourselves serving a diminishing remnant. In the words of Ecclesiastes 3:6, we have reached a time to 'seek' and to 'cast away'

In this paper I have sought to outline the characteristics of the revolution, in particular how it is changing human behavior. I haven't offered too many specific suggestions as to how we as a church can respond as this will be different for each ministry organization. I therefore encourage you to use this paper as a springboard to discuss how best you and your organization can respond.

My final encouragement is for you and your organization to offer your thoughts and plans up to God. In the words of Matthew 19:26,

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

God bless you in your endeavors,



Rev Mark Brown

Note: If you would like to participate in an ongoing discussion around the themes of this paper then become a member of the Facebook group, *The Digital Revolution and the Church* which can be found at: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=49293820791>



**About the Author:** Rev Mark Brown is Chief Executive Officer of the Bible Society in New Zealand and an Anglican Priest. In January 2007 he planted an Anglican Church in the virtual world of Second Life which now offers several services a week and has grown to more than 500 members. His personal blog is <http://brownblog.info/> He can be contacted on: [MBrown@biblesociety.org.nz](mailto:MBrown@biblesociety.org.nz)

## FOOTNOTES

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4. <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6079.html>
5. <http://nz.acnielsen.com/news/OnlineShopping.shtml>
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